DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 239 124 CE 800 075

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TITLE Reconnecting the Generations through Continuing Education.
PUB DATE [84]
NOTE 7p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adolescents; *Age Differences; *Age Groups; *Attitude Change; *Communication (Thought Transfer); Generation Gap; Group Experience; *Interpersonal Communication; Interpersonal Relationship; Middle Aged Adults; Older Adults; Residential Programs; Workshops; Young Adults
IDENTIFIERS *Intergenerational Programs; PF Project; *Retreats

ABSTRACT

Temple University's Institute on Aging (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania) has developed a unique model for cross-age learning. During the summers of 1980 and 1981, two intergenerational learning retreats were held which (1) provided participants with an innovative educational and cultural experience; (2) fostered communication among persons at different life stages; (3) broke down age-related myths and stereotypes; and (4) served as a demonstration project for other local and national intergenerational activities. The 50 to 60 persons involved in each retreat were diversified in terms of age (ages 14-93), race, ethnic background, socioeconomic status, and education. The week-long retreats, planned by intergenerational advisory committees, provided stimulating educational programs and activities which would stimulate interaction among the different age groups. The programs were divided into three distinct but integrated components: academic sessions, core groups, and recreational/cultural activities. All age groups reacted positively to being closely involved with people of different ages. A factor contributing to the success of the retreats was the collaborative learning/teaching relationship which was promoted. It was hoped that the retreats would be catalysts for other intergenerational activities and, to further this goal, a number of followup actions were initiated. (EM)

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RECONNECTING THE GENERATIONS THROUGH CONTINUING EDUCATION

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"The phenomenon of segregation by age and its consequences for human behavior and development pose problems of the greatest magnitude for the Western World in general and for American society in particular." (Broefenbrenner, 1973, p.52).

Age-related stereotypes plague our society and contribute to the growing tension between generations. A major reason for the persistence of these stereotypes is the lack of meaningful contact between persons of different ages. Children grow up with limited exposure to older people and thus, not only develop unhealthy myths and fears, but also find themselves unprepared for the changes and adjustments they will have to make over a lifetime. Middle-aged persons lack models to emulate for successful aging and thus often face the post-retirement years with trepidation. The elderly, when segregated from the mainstream of society, lose both meaning of their past experiences and a stake in the future. Isolation of one age group from another deprives all people of perspective on their own lives and from the resources, skills, and experiences of people at other stages in the life cycle.

In an attempt to reconnect people across generational borders, Temple University's Institute on Aging has developed a unique model for cross-age learning. During the summers of 1980 and 1981, two intergenerational learning retreats were held at Temple's Ambler campus. These week-long residential retreats were designed to: 1) provide participants with an innovative educational and cultural experience; 2) foster communication among persons at different life stages; 3) break down age-related myths and stereotypes;

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ard, 4) serve as a demonstration project for other local and national intergenerational activities.

The 50-60 persons involved in each retreat were diversified in terms of age, race, ethnic background, socioeconomic status, and education. Ranging in age from 14 years to 93 years, the participants were recruited from area high schools, colleges, community organizations, and senior centers. Emphasis was placed on bringing together individuals who could communicate effectively and/or had demonstrated some leadership potential within their own settings.

The retreats were planned by intergenerational advisory committees which were concerned not only with developing stimulating educational programs, but also with designing activities which would stimulate interaction among the different age groups. To achieve this mixture, the program each year was divided into three distinct but integrated components: 1) academic sessions, 2) core groups, and 3) recreational/cultural activities. The three components blended together to challenge the participants to contemplate and discuss the retreat themes --"The Quality of Life as We Enter the '80's" (1980) and "Lifelong Wellness" (1981)-- from an intergenerational perspective.

The academic component involved carefully selected Temple University faculty from a variety of disciplines and resource people from the community. Although the content included formal college-level presentations, an informal teaching style, coupled with a variety of experiential teaching techniques, was used to maximize the involvement and learning of the students. Students were encouraged to share their unique perceptions and life

experiences as they related to the content. Topics discussed included intimacy, sexuality, stress management, nutrition, and loss and grief.

The classroom sessions were complemented by the small, age-integrated support groups which were formed as a unique approach for encouraging meaningful interchange among the participants. Core groups, each consisting of 12 participants and a professional facilitator trained in both group process and life span development, became closely-knit intergenerational family units that provided participants with a sense of belonging. These groups met daily to provide participants with an opportunity to personalize some of the issues raised in the academic classes and to share life experiences. A climate of trust was developed as group members began to disclose personal feelings, fears, and needs. A poignant example of this occurred when a young and middle-aged member of a group revealed that they would choose to end their lives rather than face a period of disability and dependence. The caring expressed by older members as they attempted to help these younger individuals cope with their fears of aging brought the group to a deeper level of understanding and intimacy.

Recreational and cultural activities added a third major component to the program. Swimming, tennis, and hiking provided participants with some physical activity and a variety of theatrical, musical, and dance performances were offered in the evenings. On the final night of each retreat, the participants organized their own talent show. This event was a source of great pride for the participants and was a vivid demonstration that people of all ages have talents and resources to contribute.

The retreats were evaluated through the administration of pre-retreat questionnaires and post-retreat evaluations designed by an independent evalu-

ator to assess the extent to which the retreat met the program's objectives.

Reactions of all age groups to the experience of being closely involved with people of different ages were overwhelmingly positive. Participants expressed enthusiasm about new across-age friendships, cited the warmth and understanding they both gave and received, and felt emotionally and intellectually enriched by the intergenerational experience. The younger group commented positively on gaining wisdom from the older people; the middle group cited increased self-understanding, and the older group delighted in the openness of youth, as well as in the opportunity "to give the young our experiences in life."

> "My whole assumption of elderly people was totally wrong. They're active, fun to be with, wise and want to have just as much fun as the younger people do." (15 years)
>
> "...surprised to meet 75-year-olds that are very much 'alive' and doing things besides talk about disease and their operations."(35 years)
>
> "I was impressed with their (younger people's) interest in the issues that confront our society and their ability to communicate with adults." (74 years)
>
> "Something I realized about myself was that I can listen, learn, and still hope to fulfill a desire to attend college someday." (79 years)

A factor contributing to the success of the retreat was the collaborative learning/teaching relationship promoted between participants and staff, as well as among participants as a group. There was a flow of information, shared experiences, emotional support and intergenerational wisdom that transcended rigid academic, gender and age boundaries. Participants were encouraged to share individual resources and talents with others, in a teaching/learning partnership.

It is clear that this retreat was an effective model for intergenerational learning. Most learning theorists agree that people learn best when they are personally engaged in their own re-education, and that experiential learning is most likely to result in the internalization and ongoing maintenance of desirable change. During the two intergenerational retreats, participants not only explored age-related myths and stereotypes; they made personal discoveries and changes through living, learning and playing with a caring, growing group of individuals whose ages spanned eight decades.

It was hoped that the retreats would be catalysts for other intergenerational activities and would go beyond being meaningful one time experiences for a selected group of individuals. To further this goal, a number of follow-up actions was initiated.

A videotape presentation, created from the 1980 experience, has been shown at various professional meetings and in the community to stimulate other intergenerational projects. In addition, participants from both retreats have formed an association dedicated to the development of ongoing intergenerational experiences for an expanded population. They have conducted a variety of one day workshops, initiated a shared housing project and are in the process of developing social action plans.

Consultations with local public and private schools have stimulated the development of curricula that incorporates aging content and experiences. Other strategies for involving older adults in schools and younger students in senior centers are being explored.

Funding of the retreats held thus far was provided by the Institute on Aging for the 1980 retreat and by corporate and private contributions for

the 1981 retreat. Additional funding is being sought for expanded programs, technical assistance, and resource development. Both written and audio-visual materials are essential to foster the development of similar efforts.

There is no doubt that the time has come to alter the societal structures that contribute to the perpetuation of age segregation. Programs such as the intergenerational retreat can serve as models for stimulating cross-age dialogue and confronting age-related myths and stereotypes.

REFFRENCE

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